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SUBJECT: GOC RATTLING THE VETO SABER OVER ACCESS TO TURKISH PORTS

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald L. Schlicher; Reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

**¶1.** (C) The Greek Cypriot political establishment is issuing thinly veiled threats against Turkey's EU accession course, following an unsuccessful February 22 attempt by a Cypriot-flagged container ship, the Able F, to dock at the Turkish port of Mersin. Government spokesman George Lillikas issued a statement immediately after the incident in which he asserted that "the government is taking due action towards the Austrian EU Presidency, as well as to the European Commission. This act by Ankara constitutes a serious violation, *inter alia*, of the Customs Union Agreement which exists between Turkey and EU. With its stance, Turkey has proved yet another time that it refused to harmonize itself with the *acquis communautaire* and is not convincing in its commitment to proceed in its EU course, exhibiting respect for its obligations." House President and AKEL party leader Demetris Christofias described Ankara's refusal to allow the Able F to dock as "totally wrong," adding that Ankara was in breach of its obligations as an EU candidate country.

**¶2.** (SBU) Even before this most recent incident, the GOC's rhetoric about Turkey had been heating up. In a press conference last week, Lillikas warned that Cyprus would "certainly" veto Turkey's EU accession course if Ankara did not meet its obligations to the EU to open its ports and airports to Cypriot traffic. President Papadopoulos has affirmed that the "option of using our veto remains on the table," but has sought to nuance Lillikas' direct threat by stressing that the veto was "a last line of defense" in protecting the interests of the ROC. By Papadopoulos' count, Cyprus will have 71 veto opportunities in the course of Turkey's accession talks, but he also stressed his hope that "such a confrontation will not be required."

**¶3.** (C) Although many in Nicosia have their doubts, our contacts at the MFA deny that the Able F's attempted port call was a deliberate provocation on the part of the GOC. "That doesn't mean," one MFA official hastened to add, "that we won't insist on Turkey's complying fully with its EU obligations." Unconfirmed reports in the GOC press that the Able F has anchored off Mersin and refuses to leave until the captain gets in writing the reasons the ship was denied permission to dock, has further fueled speculation that this was a planned event. In any event, the sharp up-tick in aggressive GOC rhetoric seems aimed in part at setting the stage for Papadopoulos' February 28 meeting with Kofi Annan in Paris. Threatening a crisis in the EU encourages member states to pressure the SYG to be more accommodating of Greek Cypriot demands. We have heard from UNFICYP officials that a

number of key EU players -- and in particular the UK -- are visibly eager for a new UN process that will ease the burden the Cyprus issue has placed on EU decision-making. UNFICYP Deputy Chief of Mission Susan Allee told us that the GOC had, in effect, thrown down the gauntlet for the SYG and was all but daring him to push back. Allee stressed that the UN's expectations for the upcoming meeting had started out low and continued to shrink.

¶4. (C) Comment: Papadopoulos seems to have returned from his recent visit to Austria emboldened. The government's pugnacious rhetoric regarding Turkey's EU obligations will play well domestically and Papadopoulos senses he has sufficient support in EU circles to make the threat of a veto a credible, if still unattractive, option. Although it is unlikely that the Able F was "sent" to Mersin by the GOC as a deliberate challenge to Turkey, we suspect that the aborted port call did not come as a surprise to the GOC. Whether planned or not, the incident was a target of opportunity that Papadopoulos and Lillikas have been unable to resist. The demand for a written explanation from Turkey may well be an effort to establish grounds for future GOC legal and political challenges to Ankara. Cypriot shipping interests see the restrictions on access to Turkish ports as a significant competitive disadvantage and will continue to press the government for results. It is easy to predict that the issue of ships and planes will be a recurring motif in the months ahead. Both the ROC and Turkey are inclined to brinkmanship, and the most likely result is a serious crisis in Ankara's EU accession process sometime in 2006.

SCHLICHER